

Duxbury Rural & Historical Society Centenary Essay Contest Winners

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT E. MERRY

As an integral part of its celebration of its first hundred years, and realizing the place Duxbury schools have always held in the life of the town, the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society offered a \$1,000 scholarship award for the best essay describing some aspect of Duxbury history. Only 2 such essays were submitted, and these both were of such sterling quality the awards committee decided to divide the award money between the 2 contestants, Jennifer Hall and Cynthia Levine. What follows is a brief report of these 2 outstanding young people and a summary of each essay.

Jennifer Hall was born in Newport, R.I., and came to Duxbury and entered school in the 4th grade. She has been admitted to Harvard where she expects to major in the humanities, especially music and ecology, and possibly head for a law degree. She has been active in music this year and was editor of the yearbook.

Cynthia Levine was born in Cornwall, N.Y., and came to Duxbury, entering the school system at the 6th grade level. She will attend Bates College, Lewiston, ME, seeking to enrich her background in literature with the possible career of teaching. Accessibility to ski areas also has its charms for her. She has been active in school drama and writing.

The essays follow:

Duxbury Churches and Religious Diversity A Mirror of the Emerging National Culture By Jennifer Hall

In 1800, there was only one church in Duxbury, the First Congregational Parish, in existence since 1632. Dr. John Allyn became minister of the First Parish in 1788, having just received his master's degree from Harvard. ...Duxbury was fortunate to have a minister like (him), whose personality undoubtedly helped hold the parish together. Yet, it was the combination of his personality with Duxbury's strong Puritan background, growing economic prosperity, and cosmopolitan outlook that made the transition to Unitarianism a natural occurrence.

The congregation had a world-wide outlook and all the wealthy sea captains and shipbuilders were pew holders (since in fact it was the only church). It was said that "the people possessed polish and refinement of manner that comes from travel...the town was rich in foreign importations...it would be difficult to find a more hospitable, intelligent, social and cultivated people in any New England town...."

Meanwhile the Methodist Episcopal Church had been formed in 1819 as a reaction to the new Unitarian theology of the First Parish Church. This was the first division of churches in Duxbury's history, and it is interesting that 5 of the 6 original founders were women. This church met in a hired hall until 1821 when they moved into a building belonging to The Hon. Seth Sprague. Sprague who in later years was known as "Patriarch of the Town" was a very influential man in Duxbury. He was justice of the peace for 40 years and a member of the state legislature for 27 years. He played a very important role in the development of Duxbury churches... (he) joined the Methodist Episcopal congregation in 1821. He gave a large sum of money and the land on which their meetinghouse (the present St. John's Church) was built in 1823. He gradually became the leader of the church. In fact, Sprague was affectionately known as "Father Sprague" by the congregation.

Abolitionism and temperance were the main humanitarian and moral issues of the day. The Plymouth County Memorial paper shows a steady growth of concern and interest in these 2 issues. By 1842, "Temperance items" or similar news articles were appearing in regular columns in the paper. In Duxbury, there was a "Total Abstinence Society," whose president was the Hon. Gershom Weston, the wealthiest and most influential man of the town. Seth Sprague had always felt a strong sympathy for the abolitionists...and manifested a lively interest in their proceedings. In fact he was the president of the Plymouth County and Duxbury Abolitionist societies and he was vice president and manager of the Massachusetts and American Anti-Slavery societies. Sprague could not accept the neutral stance of the church and felt that by not condemning slavery they were condoning it. This resulted in his withdrawing from the church along with 58 followers with the intention of forming a new church which supported his anti-slavery views.

This new church was...intended originally to be independent; but to get more membership, the church gave up its independent position and became the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Duxbury. Organized in 1842 in the schoolhouse of District 1, it soon became the champion of temperance and anti-slavery. Additionally the meetinghouse served many various purposes in the town because the other hall, owned by the Masons, was not for rent and so all travelling showmen, lecturers, singing schools and other entertainers who stopped in Duxbury would perform in the Wesleyan Meeting House.

The Universalist Church of Duxbury was formed

in 1825. Universalism was a liberal movement that was not held in very high esteem in Duxbury in comparison with the other churches, though the church had over 67 original members. They had their meetinghouse erected in 1826 on the Winsor lot and they held their annual meetings every March or April....Exactly when the society became totally inactive is not known, though it was in 1866 that the meetinghouse was sold for \$785 and the Universalist Society of Duxbury officially ceased to exist....

By combining together all the histories of Duxbury churches between 1800 and 1850 Duxbury as a town can be better understood. The fact that Duxbury was a maritime community, with a cosmopolitan outlook and a Puritan background, made it easy and natural for the town to accept religious revivalism and humanitarian reforms. During the previous 200 years there had been only one church in Duxbury, yet in the span of less than 30 years there was an expansion (if we include churches in Ashdod and West Duxbury) to 5 churches. Because of the rapid rise in pluralism, the town ceased to support the Unitarian (The First Parish) Church with public taxes in 1828 -- this was 5 years before the official separation of church and state in Massachusetts.

By Cynthia Levine

At the beginning of the 19th century the Tree of Knowledge had seen much mail service and had become quite well known. It had seen it all begin when main "runners" carrying mail in sailing packets between Massachusetts Bay colonies and Plymouth informally and not dependably left messages and letters for Duxbury residents at its base. No one knew then of the spirit within the tree (do all trees have spirits?). This was simply done because the tree was conveniently located at the "North Bend" of the Plymouth-Boston road sometimes called the "4 corners at Tarkiln." This was the junction of the Massachusetts Bay Path (the westerly of 2 King's highways built in 1685 to Boston via Hanover and Scituate, now Rte. 53) and the Duxbury Road (built in 1763). In 1775 the tree had gotten its name when the first official post office was set up in Plymouth on May 12. A postmaster, William Watson, and 2 Post-riders, Timothy Goodwin and Joseph Howland, had been appointed and a box nailed to the tree....

The tree didn't realize also that it was holding the world together with its mail that could be brought home and cherished. In winter, for example, if any letter reading was going to be done (aloud) it would have to be in the early afternoon in the sitting room or kitchen as those were usually the only places fires were kept going daily after nightfall, the light being only sufficient for sitting around the fire and talking....Letters were perhaps dreamed about in sub-zero bedrooms at night with windows that let the snow in. In summer letters may have been read in bedrooms which served many purposes...especially sewing. Shutters would have been closed for shade against direct sunlight. Exterior blinds kept out rain, allowed air circulation...in some houses the front and rear doors could be opened to create a breezy sitting room in the front hallway where letters might be read.

In 1834 the first railroad in Massachusetts, the Boston and Worcester Railroad came into existence. In 1845 the stage mail went out of existence. Exactly what happened to the tree after this is disputed but these 2 legends seems to be most common: either the tree was destroyed by lightning at the stroke of midnight, or the townspeople were negligent in their care of the tree. In either legend a "local patriarch" reported that a vision had appeared to him and scolded the Tarkiln community for not caring for the tree.

"The voice grew jaded
See that thou mark's the spot
See that I'm not forgot,
Else cursed shall be thy lot.
The form then faded."
"So then with hearts benign
Reared we a noble sign,
Blazened with this design,
An oak tree spreading.
And while the sign stands there
Bearing the legend fair,
Tended with loving care,
No curse we're dreading."

This man was a respected citizen of the community and because of his report a sign was put up the very next day. Those benign hearts (referred to in the above poem) didn't know they were setting a tradition to be carried through the next hundred years and at least 4 more signs. One of these would be from Mrs. Lucia Alden Bradford and Mrs. Knapp of Plymouth and another by Miss Grace Waterman of Kingston, a painting of a mounted carrier delivering mail. Still another (perhaps the most famous) would be a watercolor of a coach and four starting from the tree, this painted by Fanny B. Clark of Duxbury. This sign would be given to the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society on Oct. 13, 1928, when they voted to take over the sign at the Tree of Knowledge. A new sign was erected on July 8, 1921, at a cost of \$125. Mr. John Simmons presided at the exercises and Mrs. Wendell Phillips led the children in the singing of patriotic songs. The spirit of the tree would be happy to hear Mrs. Clark say, "The spirit which induces the community to preserve its traditions is entitled to all praise. It is a pleasure and perhaps a duty to offer service on its behalf, and I hope the sign may serve for many years to come."

Mr. Wendell Phillips here distributed his privately published book containing the poem (quoted above) telling the story of the tree and how it helped him gain his title of "Patron Saint of the Tree of Knowledge." It is believed he is a lineal descendant of the "local patriarch" who saw the vision of the spirit of the tree. He was a selectman for 24 years and lived on Winter St.

The Clark sign would stand until the 1970's when damage from snow plows, snow piles, and a car off the road would lead to its removal by the highway department who would hold it until its transport by Dorothy Wentworth, the town historian, to the King Caesar House....The Tercentenary Committee placed a granite marker on the spot where the sign stood which reads as follows:

TREE OF KNOWLEDGE
1774-1845

Mail Box on Oak Tree for
Post Riders and Stages Between
Plymouth and Boston.